A Guide to Writing Monkey Cage Guest Posts

Included in this guide:

- What The Monkey Cage is trying to do (and what audiences we're trying to reach)
- How to approach writing for us—and how we will respond if we want your piece
- The three main kinds of posts we publish (and the two kinds we do not)
- What kind of writing we're looking for (hint: it's not your academic abstract)

1. Start by pitching us your idea. Before you write, please query the blog or one of the regular blog contributors—preferably the one who works in the subfield closest to yours—and propose what you want to write about. That way we can determine whether your idea is a good fit for the blog, how we might want you to revise it, and generally how we want to proceed.

If you get a provisional go ahead, we will then put you in touch with E.J. Graff, our managing editor. Once you submit your post, she will edit it to ensure that it meets our style requirements and is clear and comprehensible to the lay reader.

If at any point in the editing process, you feel that revisions have altered or misrepresented your argument, you should say so. You will get the chance to approve all major edits. However, we also expect that you will be open to the edits that E.J. or one of the contributors provides. In most cases, those edits will make the post better.

Please also be aware that we will write the headline and sub-head for the post.

What are we looking for?

We are looking for good writing based on good social science findings. Most of our posts take one of the following forms.

(1) *Illuminating the news (and current events generally) with what you know from your own and others' social science research.* When your research can explain something about current events, we want to hear from you. Good posts are usually built around a *single important point*. Don't give us a general overview of your research. Focus on the crucial thing that people need to know to better understand the story or events in question.

   Here's how to structure this type of post:
   - *Short* Provide a short introduction that explains the current story— because not everyone will know all the details, and even if they do, you can frame the story so as to make the relevance of your research clear. Then

tell them what your finding is, ideally in one sentence.

Then you can talk about the evidence supporting your finding, the background, its implications, and so on—remembering all the time that you are talking to the general public, not social scientists. Then, perhaps close with a discussion of the more general implications of your argument or finding.

(2) *Describing an important and publicly relevant new research finding*. We like to keep as close as we can to the news cycle, since our public is usually interested in finding out about how social science explains current events, rather than caring about social science for itself. Sometimes, however, social scientists make findings that are innately interesting and likely to provoke debate. We like these posts too.

Again, typically a good post will make a single important point, rather than describing all of a particular piece of research. It will discuss the evidence that supports this point. It will help people understand why this point is important, how it addresses major public controversies and so on. Hence, it should be addressed to the public, not fellow academics. The point that is most likely to be of interest to the reviewers of the *APSR*, or *International Organization*, or *Political Theory* is not always (and perhaps not usually) going to be the point that is most interesting to the general public. If you need help in refining your point, talk to us and E.J.

(3) *Using social science to write an "explainer" post on current affairs*. Social scientists know a lot about the world. When an important issue comes up, they are often well positioned to write a post that explains the key things that you need to know about an issue – for example, "5 Key Things You Need to Know About the Nuclear Negotiations with Iran." These should take the form of several bullet points or several questions, each followed by 3-5 sentences worth of explanation. It is also possible to structure this as a quasi-interview with you. Explainer posts often get a lot of attention, and can help boost the writer's visibility to interested policy makers and the public.

What are we not looking for?

(1) *Op-eds*. We get a lot of submissions that look like op-eds, since this is the form of public writing that most political scientists are most familiar with. We almost always reject these posts (sometimes pointing to other places better suited to

publish them, when we think they have innate merit), or require very heavy revisions.

Unlike the op-ed page, we require you to support your claims with good academic research (it doesn't have to be published, but it does have to be well done). And unlike many op-eds, we do not need or want to propose a public policy solution to a problem that you identify.

Finally, The Monkey Cage is non-partisan. We do not look to you to express opinions, and, if you use politically loaded language, we will almost certainly ask you to change it. This is not to say that we require you to foreswear all your views and beliefs. We simply want you to limit your claims to what can be supported by good social science evidence, and to limit your language to the kind of language that you might use to convince a reasonably dispassionate observer that there's some empirical merit to your argument.

To be sure, if the social science evidence happens to be more convenient for one political faction, that is fine. It is not inappropriate to note that the evidence fails to support the argument of one side in a debate. It is not inappropriate to say that a country's government is not democratic, if that is what the standard indicators suggest. But drawing out such implications is different than stating a personal opinion.

(2) *Research articles*. When you write for us, you are not writing for other social scientists. You are writing for a general audience, who can be expected to be reasonably intelligent and reasonably interested in the world around them. (This excludes the commenters on articles. You can ignore them.)

The modal reader of your post will not especially care about purely academic debates between competing camps of scholars. She will not care about the methodological sophistication of your argument (except to the extent that this makes your argument more likely to be right).

Instead, she will care about whether the point you are making is well grounded and interesting. You shouldn't be writing for your colleagues. Instead, you are writing for your really smart cousin, who didn't go into the social sciences, but has a lively interest in current affairs (and whom you want to impress with your understanding of the world). Or, to think of it differently, you are writing for an undergraduate who is interested in politics and maybe even political science, but has little relevant background in the discipline.

How should you write?

- Link your post to the research that you are relying on (although see point 3 below). Your reader should be able to evaluate your argument, and find the research that it is based on.

- Clear, declarative sentences, with a minimum of academic jargon. "A statistical model" is okay. "A hierarchical logistic regression" is not. "Is associated with" is okay. "We used rainfall as an instrumental variable" is not.

- No footnotes, endnotes or bibliographies. If you want to refer to another source, embed a hyperlink in a word or a few words like this.

- Short posts. 500-1,300 words is the sweet spot. We do occasionally publish posts that go over this limit (especially if they are explainer posts, which break up the text). But we try not to. If you are above this limit, you are likely to find your post edited, or to be asked to shorten it.

- Paragraphs should be 2-3 sentences long. Long paragraphs are hard to read on-line.

- A minimum of throat clearing and background. Provide the information that is necessary for the reader to understand your point, and understand why it is important. That's all you need and should have.

- Graphics. If you have a graph that supports your argument and that is comprehensible to the ordinary public, we will probably be delighted to have it. However, be aware that the graph should be completely self-explanatory—that is, a reader should be able to understand it fully even if they did not read the text of the article. Thus, each graph needs:

  - A clear title that describes what the reader is seeing or should be seeing.
  - Clear labels for the axes. Even better, label the axis values in a way that an axis title is not necessary (e.g., use percent signs so that you don't need a title "Percent" to tell readers that the "60" on the axis refers to "60%.")
  - Labels for points, lines, or bars as needed. It is almost always better to label these things directly on the graph, rather than force the reader to look at a legend.
  - A note under the graph describing the source of the data.

  It should also be clear in the text where the graph should go and that you are referring to the graph. But please do not label graphs with numbers ("Figure 1," etc.). We do not use this kind of scholarly format in a blog post.

  Overall, keep in mind that this is a graph intended for a broader audience. It should therefore avoid depicting quantities or concepts that will be unfamiliar to most readers (e.g., error bars).

- The Washington Post house style discourages excess use of italics (e.g. for magazine or journal titles or the like). Please don't use them unless you have to, and don't use bold, different font sizes or the like. The plainer the better.

- Include a one-sentence bio at the end. Embed a link to your website in your name.

- A note regarding pseudonyms: We will publish pieces under pseudonyms if using the author's name could bring real harm to that person. We do not publish pieces under pseudonyms if doing so allows an author to violate the rules of their own organization.

- You can submit your post as a Word or .rtf file, or (if you are familiar with WordPress blogging) the cutdown HTML that WordPress can use. Other commonly used formats (e.g. Markdown) unfortunately don't work.

- If you have graphics, please send them as a *separate attachment* in png or jpg format.

We reserve the right to refuse guest posts, and we will usually explain why.